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Parallels with the Past – How the Soviets Lost in Afghanistan, How the Americans are Losing

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***Abstract:** This article assesses seven startling and unsettling similarities between Soviet strategies and tactics in Afghanistan during their Afghan war of 1979–1989 and American coalition strategies and tactics in Afghanistan since October 2001. It concludes with the implications of this dynamic. In particular, the similarities between Soviet and U.S. approaches to Afghanistan that focus on key population centers, reconciliation/reintegration, and the development of “Afghan” solutions to a variety of security concerns are extremely disturbing and, we believe, should be the focus of national attention and debate.*

On May 20, 2010, General Stanley McChrystal, then the American commander in Afghanistan, referred to the operation in Marjah, Helmand – an operation earlier touted as a potential turning point for U.S. Afghan counterinsurgency (COIN) – as a “bleeding ulcer.”¹ Immediately, we were reminded of a similar expression from an earlier Afghan War. In February 1986, Soviet General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev, speaking to the 27th General Congress of the Communist Party, posited that the Soviet war in Afghanistan had become a “bleeding wound.” Was McChrystal’s comment just an unfortunate choice of words or a harbinger that the United States faced a Soviet-style disaster in Afghanistan?

¹ Dion Nissenbaum, “McChrystal Lights Fire Under Marjah Commanders,” *McClatchey Newspapers*, May 25, 2010. Accessed at: <http://blogs.mcclatchydc.com/kabul/2010/05/mcchrystal-sounds-alarm-in-marjah.html> on May 27, 2010.

Soviet Afghan Invasion

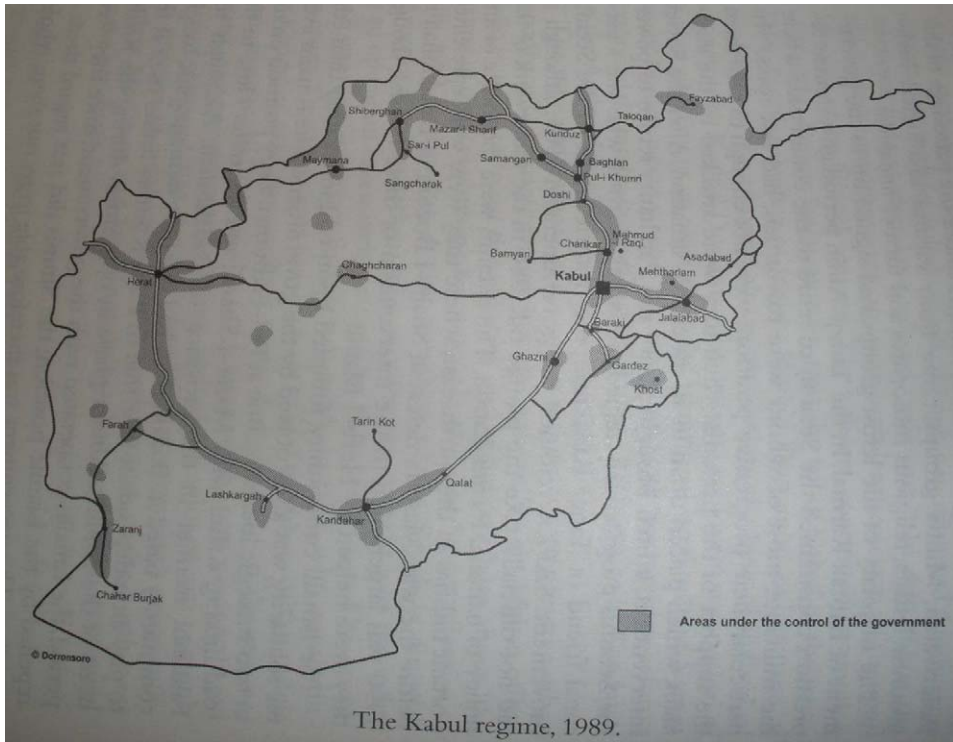
The Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan on Christmas Day of 1979 ostensibly to rescue a failing Communist government. The People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) had overthrown the Mohammad Daoud government in April 1978 (*Saur* Revolution) and then engaged in bloody infighting and ambitious reforms that shocked Afghanistan's largely rural and conservative population into rebellion. The Soviets brought with them in December 1979 a new president for Afghanistan, Babrak Karmal, who they installed in the Presidential Palace as soon as they had killed Hafizullah Amin, the existing president.

The rebellion quickly turned into a national resistance movement and the Soviets responded with sweep and clear tactics aimed at depopulating the countryside that was supporting and aiding the Afghan mujahideen, especially in areas near the Afghan-Pakistani border. By 1981, Afghanistan had the dubious distinction of producing the world's largest single refugee population; most fled to Pakistan or Iran. Pakistan also became the base for most of the fledgling mujahideen, Muslim guerrilla warriors engaged in a jihad, who were eventually aided by the United States, China, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and other countries aligned against the Soviet Union in the last great battle of the Cold War.

By the mid-1980s, the Soviet Union was bogged down in Afghanistan even as a new generation of leadership was emerging in Moscow. The new Soviet leadership, led by Mikhail Gorbachev, realized that time was running out on their Afghan adventure, and they made significant strategic adjustments to try to rescue what they could from what was shaping up to be a failure of epic proportions. First, they shifted their military strategy away from combating a rural insurgency to controlling the population centers and the road corridor that connected them. Second, they tried to change the unpopular puppet government they had installed and took measures to boost its popularity, primarily through a reconciliation program. Third, the Soviets concentrated on building a competent Afghan army and security forces to which they could hand off the job of Afghan security. All of these strategies were pursued in the context of an overall Soviet policy to modernize Afghanistan that ultimately alienated many traditional Afghans who were satisfied with Afghan societal and political norms. As we will argue below, it appears that the United States is trying to do all of these things again today, as if the Soviet experience never happened.

For example, following the attacks of September 11, 2001, the United States quickly mounted a military operation in Afghanistan that drove the Taliban from power and al Qaeda into Pakistan by early 2002. As part of the plan for making Afghanistan unsuitable as a base for terrorists with global aspirations, the United States, other key states from the International Community, and the United Nations held a December 2001 Bonn Conference aimed at producing an interim Afghan government and a template for transforming Afghan politics toward Western democracy. Hamid Karzai was

Figure 1. Areas under Soviet and Afghan Government Control, 1989^{*}



selected to be the leader of the government, meaning the United States also installed a puppet and embarked on unpopular social transformation, just as the Soviet union had done over three decades earlier.

Population-Centric Strategy

The vast majority of the Afghan population (75–80 percent) lives scattered across the countryside, from which all previous Afghan rebellions have originated. Soviet strategies initially focused on controlling the cities and key transportation routes, while launching search and destroy missions into the countryside in an effort to destroy insurgent sanctuaries and depopulate rural Afghanistan. The Geneva Accords of April 1988 that established a timetable for the withdrawal of Soviet troops from Afghanistan prompted a switch to a strategy that kept most Soviet troops on relatively secure bases and/or in concentric circles around the larger towns and cities (see Figure 1). In

^{*} Gilles Dorransoro, *Revolution Unending: Afghanistan, 1979 to the Present* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), p. 186.

addition to garrisoned soldiers, some Soviet troops as well as Afghan government forces were used to hold the main “Ring Road” that connects Afghan urban areas. This urban population-centric strategy, in conjunction with a massive aid program, helped facilitate the Soviet withdrawal and also the continued (albeit temporary) maintenance of the Afghan Communists in power through control of the towns, cities, and main roads, while the mujahideen operated relatively freely in the remaining 80 percent of Afghanistan – the Afghan rural hinterland. By fall 1991, nearly two and a half years after the completion of the Soviet withdrawal, Russian President Boris Yeltsin cut off supplies to Afghanistan. The Afghan Communist government fell apart almost immediately, although the mujahideen did not take Kabul until April 1992.

Shortly after being named the new commander of U.S. forces in Afghanistan in 2009, General Stanley McChrystal asserted that the situation in Afghanistan required a new strategy that focused on the Afghan population. In practical terms, this new strategy would mean that U.S., NATO, and allied forces would concentrate their efforts on “key districts” that included a “meaningful proportion of the Afghan population,” (that is, larger towns and cities), as well as the road network that connects them. The old “enemy-centric” strategy that produced multiple operations – numerous maneuver element search and destroy missions every year, often conducted in remote mountainous or rural areas by an individual country’s contingent of forces, would apparently be relegated to the past. These operations were to be primarily conducted by U.S. and NATO forces garrisoned on large Forward Operating Bases (FOBs). Ironically, many of these FOBs were in the same locales as the Soviet garrisons of the 1980s. In both instances, most of these bases were located near provincial capitals and other urban areas and major lines of communications (LOCs).

McChrystal’s focus on the key population centers, which for the most part was continued by General David Petraeus who took over the command of U.S. and International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) Forces from McChrystal in June 2010, is very similar to the ineffective city-centric strategy followed 25 years earlier by the Soviets. Like the mujahideen a generation earlier, this is not where the Taliban primarily operate and when they do they are extremely difficult to identify or separate from the population. It is a military dictum that it is virtually impossible to defeat a rural insurgency in a largely agrarian country by securing the urban areas. The Soviets eventually learned this; apparently the United States has yet to do so.

Unpopular Government Attempts Reconciliation Program

Despite the brutality of a Soviet war that cost the Afghans more than one million killed to about 15,000 Soviet dead, the Soviets and Afghan Communist government pursued reconciliation programs during the

1980s. They sought to end the war by proposing ceasefires, incentives, and concessions to the mujahideen. Reconciliation efforts were especially focused on northern Afghanistan where the Soviets and Afghan Communists attempted to promote common traditions and practices as a way to pacify various ethno-linguistic groups along the Afghan-Soviet Central Asian border. Cultural delegations to promote understanding between the Soviet occupiers and a variety of northern Afghan ethno-linguistic groups appeared frequently in the northern provinces, and the Soviets even tried to reconcile with local religious leaders through a restored “Society of Ulema” (Muslim legal scholars).

In addition, the Soviets pursued programs that allowed traditional Afghan leaders (tribal elders and religious figures) to have some influence in government in exchange for loyalty to it via reconciliation.² Finally, Soviet resources were used in an attempt to co-opt entire communities into the service of the government. The Soviets often enticed through the traditional system of patronage by providing a group with money and armaments in exchange for its support, either in the form of active operations against the resistance or simply keeping the area free of mujahideen.³

After the Soviets replaced Babrak Karmal with Najibullah in 1986, Najibullah made significant reconciliation overtures to the mujahideen until the early 1990s in an attempt to end the conflict. He issued a program, “On National Reconciliation in Afghanistan,” in early 1987 that initiated a ceasefire as well as incentives to rebel leaders to lay down their arms and join the Kabul Government. This program was based partly on a new constitution that provided for legislative institutions of government and did away with the single-party Revolutionary Council that had previously helped rule the country. The mujahideen were even offered seats in the government, including control over key ministries, but only if they would reconcile and end the fighting; the mujahideen consistently rejected such offers, in part, because these programs were pursued at a time when the Kabul regime was viewed as fragile and vulnerable. Historically in Afghanistan, such calls for reconciliation are viewed as measures of weak institutions or regimes that are on the verge of defeat.

Similarly, since early 2003 President Hamid Karzai has called for national reconciliation with the Taliban in an attempt to bring peace to Afghanistan. Program Takhim-e Sohl (PTS)⁴ was established in 2005 and

² Gilles Dorronsoro, *Revolution Unending: Afghanistan, 1979 to the Present* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), pp. 179–182.

³ Antonio Giustozzi, *War, Politics and Society in Afghanistan: 1978–1992* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2000), pp. 210–18.

⁴ This reconciliation program has been variously known as the Peace Through Strength Program, Afghan Truth & Reconciliation Commission, National Reconciliation Commission (NRC), National Commission for Peace in Afghanistan, or simply the Afghan Reconciliation Program.

has been a keystone of Karzai's strategy, although at times some of his support for these programs appears to be little more than self-promoting propaganda, or even disinformation. PTS failed, in part, due to inadequate funding and the lack of domestic Afghan political support. It was replaced by the Afghan Peace and Reconciliation Program (APRP). The APRP has also been fraught with problems including being led by the former Afghan President and leader of the anti-Taliban Northern Alliance (Shura-e Nazar-e Shamali) Burhanuddin Rabbani, who is deeply mistrusted by the Taliban, few of whom are willing to reconcile to a program under his command.⁵ Despite the reconciliation of a very few highly-placed Taliban and insurgent leaders early on in the program, meaningful reconciliation of influential Taliban has been minimal. And few Taliban foot soldiers have laid down their arms. A highly touted peace assembly, or "Peace Jirga," of tribal elders and powerbrokers was held in May 2010 to systematically address reconciliation, but its success thus far has been more publicity than substance. Even former Ambassador Karl Eikenberry "warned that the money associated with reintegration risked 'creating perverse incentives, short-changing individuals and communities that have not fed the insurgency.'"⁶

We believe that the reconciliation/negotiation policies pursued by Karzai have failed because the Taliban insurgency is best defined as an insurgency wrapped in the narrative of *jihad*. History suggests that secular insurgents negotiate, *jihadists* do not. The Taliban that matter most within the movement are *jihadists* with perceived intense religious obligations (for instance, Mullah Omar, the *Amir ul-Momineen*, or Leader of the Faithful). "Peeling" such individuals away from the Taliban is virtually impossible because they believe they are following the mandates of a higher calling. Indeed, history suggests that few, if any, *jibads* have ever ended with a negotiated settlement or via reconciliation. Additionally, as suggested above, negotiation is not viewed as a tactic of the strong in Afghanistan; hence when a government struggling with a resilient insurgency announces reconciliation and negotiation efforts as a centerpiece of its strategy, most Afghans figure the government is on the verge of defeat. Why would the Taliban, emboldened in the belief they are on the brink of victory (after all, the United States has begun its drawdown of forces), want to negotiate or reconcile? Nevertheless, the notion of political settlements and diplomatic negotiations is difficult for Washington to dismiss even when political and cultural realities make them unrealistic. This is because such strategies are so ingrained in the American diplomatic psyche.⁷

⁵ Emilie Jelinek, "Failed Reconciliation in Khost," *Foreign Policy*, June 30, 2010, http://afpak.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2011/06/30/failed_reconciliation_in_khost (Accessed July 2, 2011).

⁶ *The Diplomat*, April 8, 2011, <http://the-diplomat.com/author/david/>.

⁷ We would like to thank Chris Mason for providing this insight.

“Afghanization”

By 1988 the central strategy of the Soviet Union was to withdraw its forces and turn the war over to the Afghan government. The success of this strategy depended on the strength and effectiveness of the Afghan security forces and their ability to maintain regime continuity and stability against the increasingly robust mujahideen.

The Afghan security forces had been trained by Soviets and organized on the Soviet model since the 1950s. Thousands of Afghan military officers were trained by the Soviets. But desertion rates soared after the Soviet invasion, with as many as 55 percent of Afghan soldiers just melting away, leaving only 50,000 regular army troops to complement the Soviet force. Although the Soviets and PDPA waged an aggressive recruitment campaign to refill the ranks, mostly from peasant communities near large urban centers such as Kabul, Kandahar, Herat, and Mazar-i-Sharif,⁸ recruitment was only able to meet between 40 and 60 percent of its goals during the first five years of the Soviet occupation.⁹ Conscription never really achieved the levels the Soviets desired, although the Ministry of Defense (MoD) did reach a high of 160,000 in 1987. One way the Soviets bolstered the numbers of the regular army was through recruitment into the Sarandoy, the heavily-armed special police of the Ministry of the Interior, which supplemented the KhAD (Afghan Secret Police). Later, after the Soviets withdrew, Najibullah “rented” various ethnic and local militias to augment the weak Afghan security forces. Nevertheless, none of these attempts were successful in creating an indigenous Afghan force that could realistically be expected to defeat the mujahideen.

Like the Soviets, the United States and NATO have also found that building effective Afghan national security forces is fraught with problems. After the Taliban regime was defeated in late 2001, a variety of countries took the lead in different sectors of Afghanistan’s security architecture as part of a Security Sector Reform program. A Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration Program (or DDR, led by Japan) was to rid the country of private militias, while building the Afghan National Army (ANA, United States lead) and Afghan National Police (ANP, initially Germany had the lead) were key to transforming Afghanistan’s security provision back to the government. Initial plans were for the ANA to reach 70,000 by 2009, a goal that many thought too ambitious when by early 2003 the ANA numbered just over 1,700. By 2010, the Ministry of Defense was claiming to have more than 100,000 troops and had revised its planned total upwards to over 170,000. These numbers were critical because by late 2009 the United States had decided to “Afghanize” the war by

⁸ Giustozzi, *War, Politics and Society in Afghanistan*, p. 289, Map 1. “Main Areas of PDPA Recruitment Among Peasants, 1980–89.”

⁹ Ibid, p. 264, Table 25. “Fulfillment of Recruitment Plans Nationwide and at the Provincial Level.”

increasing the size of Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF), primarily the ANA and ANP, to over 400,000 within five years, including 240,000 ANA and 160,000 ANP (171,600 ANA and 104,000 ANP by October 2011).¹⁰ Many of these numbers have become a bone of contention. Paradoxically, even while attempting to expand the quantity and quality of the ANA, the United States has attempted to utilize local militias and community defense forces – many of which are predatory and extractive – much like the Soviets did with the Sarandoy and their “favorite” tribes and associated militias.

With the Afghan government’s total annual revenue hovering around \$4 billion and the Obama administration’s budget request for fiscal year 2012 of \$12.8 billion to train and equip Afghanistan’s expanding army and national police force, it will be extremely difficult for Afghanistan to manage and sustain a force of that size and expense over the long term without protracted external financial and material support.¹¹ Although the United States has spent roughly \$18 billion since 2002 on the ANA it is difficult to get accurate numbers on the actual size of the force “present for duty.”¹² It is estimated that one third of the ANA is now evaporating every year through desertions and non-reenlistment. An analysis in 2005 concluded that the ANA could never grow larger than 100,000 men, because at that point the annual attrition losses would equal the maximum number of new recruits entering the force each year.¹³ A more recent study of the Afghan National Army (ANA) suggests that “[t]he push to build a unified national military in service of a civilian government has frequently clashed with the tendency to create militias in a bid to insulate the state from internal and external threats.”¹⁴

The officer corps of the ANA, developed after the Taliban’s ouster, was largely composed of commanders from the Tajik-dominated Northern Alliance.¹⁵ Mohammed Fahim, Karzai’s initial Defense Minister, who led the Northern Alliance after the assassination of famous resistance commander Ahmad Shah Massoud (by al Qaeda agents on September 9, 2001), promoted his Panjshiri Tajik allies into officer positions in the ANA. For example, “Ninety of the first 100 generals appointed to the new army were from the Tajik dominated Panjshir Valley, reigniting ethnic, regional and political factionalism

¹⁰ Rod Nordland, “U.S. Approves Training to Expand Afghan Army,” *New York Times*, January 14, 2010, http://www.nytimes.com/2010/01/15/world/asia/15afghan.html?_r=1 (accessed April 12, 2011).

¹¹ Thomas H. Johnson and Matthew DuPee, “Transition to nowhere: The limits of ‘Afghanization,’” *Foreign Policy*, March 22, 2011, http://afpak.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2011/03/22/transition_to_nowhere_the_limits_of_afghanization.

¹² The number of soldiers present for duty is the key statistic of the viability of the “Afghanization” of the war.

¹³ Thomas H. Johnson and W. Chris Mason, “Refighting the Last War. Afghanistan and the Vietnam Template,” *Military Review*, November–December 2009, pp. 2–14.

¹⁴ *International Crisis Group, A Force in Fragments: Reconstructing the Afghan National Army*, Asia Report No. 190, May 12, 2010, p. i.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 1.

within the armed forces.”¹⁶ This dynamic also occurred during the DDR program and led to “uneven disarmament. . . [with] units affiliated with the Northern Alliance often. . . the last to be demobilized,” which resulted in the targeting of non-Panjshiri units not allied with the Northern Alliance.¹⁷

While more Pashtuns have joined the officer corps since Rahim Wardak, an ethnic Pashtun, became Defense Minister in December 2004, the Tajiks still have officer numbers that do not reflect national population demographics. Similarly, the Afghan military during the Soviet occupation exhibited an out-of-proportion Tajik officer corps. The PDPA tended to select officers from their leftist allies that were highly concentrated in Tajik urban populations. Because of these factors, the probability of the successful “Afghanization” of the war effort must be questioned.

Moreover, there have been many reports of sub-par performance by ANSF units; for example, during the February 2010 Operation Moshtarak in Marjah. U.S. officers embedded with the ANA during this operation reported that 20–40 percent of ANA personnel in some field units failed urinalyses that indicated the use of drugs, especially hashish. And this was only one of the soldiering problems evinced by the deployed ANA. Their inadequate combat capabilities, dependence on foreign forces for many mission essential tasks, and apparent lack of dedication are more significant problems. Consider the Battle of Kamdesh on October 3, 2009 in Nuristan. The ANA soldiers at Combat Outpost (COP) Keating quickly broke and ran or hid under blankets on their cots in the face of a Taliban attack so intense that the outpost was essentially overrun, with eight Americans killed and 22 wounded.¹⁸ During the June 28–29, 2011 Taliban attack on Kabul’s Intercontinental Hotel, an Afghan on-site stated, “Now we are hearing about a security transition to Afghan forces, if they give the security responsibility to the current government at 10:00 a.m., the government will collapse around 12 noon. They cannot live without foreigners.”¹⁹

Meddling Powers and a Rough Neighborhood

The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, coming as it did during the Cold War, inevitably prompted an American response. In the wake of the Soviet effort to turn Vietnam into a defeat for the United States, American officials were determined to use Afghanistan to return the favor to the Soviets. Covert U.S. efforts to aid Afghan anti-Communists began at least six months before the

¹⁶ Ibid, p. 10.

¹⁷ Ibid, p. 8.

¹⁸ For example see: C. J. Chivers, “Strategic Plans Spawned Bitter End for a Lonely Outpost,” *New York Times*, July 25, 2010.

¹⁹ Alissa J. Rubin, “Attack at Kabul Hotel Deflates Security Hopes in Afghanistan,” *New York Times*, June 29, 2011.

Soviet intervention, but despite the initiation of the CIA's Operation Cyclone during his tenure, President Jimmy Carter was known more for his efforts at détente, such as the signing of the SALT II Agreement in June 1979. Nonetheless, after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, the Carter Administration began to arm the mujahideen in 1980. President Ronald Reagan was a "Cold Warrior," however, and under his administration the efforts to help the mujahideen increased dramatically, especially after National Security Decision Directive 166 in 1985, which provided for more sophisticated weaponry and money to be provided to the mujahideen and for expansion of the war into Soviet territory. In addition to the United States, other countries aided the mujahideen, either for geopolitical or religious reasons, or both. These countries included Pakistan, Iran, China, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and the United Kingdom.

Afghanistan was always destined to become a battleground between the Cold War powers, as it had been the playing field of the nineteenth century "Great Game" between Tsarist Russia and the British Empire. The Soviet Union inherited the mantle of the Russian Empire, while the United States picked up the responsibilities of the British Empire. South and Central Asia were pretty far afield from Washington, however, and the containment era mutual defense organization in that part of the world, the Central Treaty Organization (CENTO), was the weakest of all the Western pacts. Nonetheless, Pakistan was a charter member (the United States was not), which emphasized its desire to be part of the Western alliance. By contrast, India moved from its 1950s position of non-alignment to become closer to the Soviet Union by way of the 1971 Indo-Soviet Treaty of Peace, Friendship, and Co-operation.

Today, the four most significant powers in the world pursue their interests in Afghanistan. The world's hegemonic stabilizer, the United States, leads NATO, which in turn spearheads the International Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan. China is Pakistan's "all-weather friend" and most reliable ally, an extremely logical relationship since both China and Pakistan see India as a major rival. China has long considered India to be its competitor for Asian hegemony, while Pakistan has been locked into a near existential struggle with India since their painful separation at birth in 1947. Today both China and India pursue resources and influence in Afghanistan, while Pakistan worries that Indian road construction and consulates will undermine its strategic depth and maintains proxy forces to deploy in Afghanistan. The collapse of the Soviet Union into its constituent parts was in no small measure precipitated by its Afghan War, and the major state to emerge from the rotting Soviet corpse is a now somewhat humbled Russia. No longer a rival to the United States for world leadership, Russia remains a major nuclear power and the dominant outside player in the Central Asian states just north of Afghanistan. The Northern Distribution Network (NDN) passes through those states but is controlled by Russia, and much of the fuel used by the United States, NATO, and other forces in Afghanistan passes through the NDN, meaning that

Russia controls NATO's ability to continue in Afghanistan. In addition, Russia also has significant interests in Central Asian resources.

Finally, while neither are current major powers, both of Afghanistan's most important immediate neighbors (Iran and Pakistan) are emergent or recent nuclear states and have very significant interests inside Afghanistan. Both countries have ethnic (Pashtuns for Pakistan) or sectarian/ethnic (Hazaras and Farsiwan for Iran) proxies inside Afghanistan, as well as commercial and geopolitical interests associated particularly with the areas of Afghanistan adjoining their respective borders. A significant portion of U.S. and NATO supplies (40–75 percent) for Afghanistan cross Pakistani territory, while India's development of Iran's Chabahar Port and the road from there through Zaranj to Delaram provide an alternative commercial route for Afghan imports and exports. Meanwhile, China has constructed the Pakistani port of Gwadar and the road network from that desolate outpost on the Makran Coast to the more densely populated areas of Pakistan.

While the situation today does not resemble the sharply defined zero-sum rivalry of the Cold War, in both cases numerous Great Powers, Rising Powers, and Second-Tier Powers are pursuing conflicting interests in Afghanistan. Specifically, in both cases the intervening Great Power finds that its interests were/are thwarted by other regional/global actors.

Goliath Tactics: Winning Battles, Losing the War

The Soviet invasion of December 1979 had all major cities under Soviet control by the end of December. The invasion included 80,000 Soviet troops, 750 tanks, and 2000 other combat vehicles, and it was executed with distinct precision.

General Soviet tactics used in Afghanistan during their occupation included: conducting large-scale sweep and combined-arms ground offensives (many multi-division in size) to effect a symmetrical fight with elusive, asymmetric guerillas; relying heavily on air power for supporting fires and emphasizing armored vehicles, tanks, and Mi-35 (Hind) Helicopter gunships (many flown out of Bagram Airbase); searching Afghan villages, homes, and women, in blatant disregard of cultural taboos; referring to the mujahideen as "terrorists;" and using Special Operations soldiers (Spetsnaz) to attack the mujahideen, often at night and along the Pakistani border. These same tactics had been followed by the United States and NATO during much of their time in Afghanistan. The Soviets were also very slow to adapt to the Afghan battlefield environment.

The Soviet military did not suffer major battlefield defeats – although their Afghan allies did – but battlefield success did not lead to political victory. Ultimately the Soviet military's battlefield success could not be consolidated due to political limitations and especially issues of legitimacy. In the end the

Soviets were unable to legitimate their Afghan clients or their own presence with the Afghan population. The United States is presently experiencing a similar fate.

During the invasion and resulting occupation the Soviets decided to utilize conventional offensives to secure the Afghan countryside. These were pre-planned massive scale operations that involved 6,000–15,000 personnel and hundreds of aircraft. This strategy basically reflected the doctrine and operational tactics, techniques, and procedures suited for a European or Chinese theater of war, battalion-level sweep and search and destroy missions. The Soviets completely underestimated the resolve of their opponents and eventually ended up fighting not only a scattered band of guerrillas but also virtually the entire Afghan population. Moreover, from day one of their invasion, the Soviet military violated most of the cultural mores held by the Afghan population, a critical, even decisive, error.

Several times a year, the Soviets would conduct army-level operations of up to 15,000 personnel as well as conventional division or regiment-level offensive operations. These types of operations initially had tactical success, however, over the long-term they did not add up to strategic political gains. Operations were typically organized to occur sequentially in different regions rather than launched simultaneously, due to logistical and personnel constraints. Surprise was almost impossible due to the large footprint of the preparations that were underway and the excellent mujahideen intelligence network. The operations themselves were also very predictable relative to the actions taken and motorized rifle and tank formations were tactically rigid for Afghanistan's mountainous terrain, which made them vulnerable to ambushes.

Even though these offensives gained temporary control of a specific area, this control was gone the moment the forces left because the mujahideen, who would basically melt away as the attack was launched, came back and reestablished control. After the first three years of the war, the mujahideen controlled 75–90 percent of the country's territory. Effectively, a stalemate was in place where the Soviets controlled the cities and the insurgents controlled the countryside.

Given the size of the country and the type of terrain, the Soviet military was not equipped for large-scale counterinsurgency, or stability and support-type of operations. They were forced to employ new techniques and strategies for fighting the mujahideen; and employed them only after repeatedly attempting to use conventional methods, which failed strategically. The small size of the Soviet force commitment and the lack of skill displayed by their Afghan Army counterparts prevented them from maintaining strong garrisons in enough locations to have the desired effects. Soviet operations were critically hampered by the lack of a comprehensive counterinsurgency doctrine, which led to the adoption of a conventional strategy based on armored sweeps with artillery preparation that proved unsuited to the terrain and enemy the Soviets were fighting. Their general failure to account for the effects

of the terrain and climate caused them great difficulty with mobility, speed, predictability, training, and logistical vulnerabilities. The Soviet Army that was to advance 35 km. a day to the Rhine during World War II advanced 2 km. a day up the Kunar Valley in 1985. This slow rate of advance meant they could only catch mujahideen that were willing to fight. While the Soviets had extensive intelligence capabilities, they had difficulties in using them to provide an advantage at any level, from targeting to political. Unable to target most time-sensitive targets with massive firepower, the Soviets ultimately relied on patrols and Spetsnaz for interdiction as well as intelligence. The problem with gathering accurate intelligence at the Afghan village-level is a problem that has also plagued the United States in its Afghan activities.

The mujahideen utilized traditional guerilla operations and, at times, modern technology (such as the Stinger anti-aircraft missiles and radio communication gear), which forced the Soviets to alter their tactics. The mujahideen proved to be very effective at ambushes and laying mines, and they knew the terrain. The resistance tended to be more mobile and they would withdraw rather than stay to fight conventional force-on-force battles. The lack of cohesion among the resistance also impeded Soviet attempts to deny support to the opposition or drive a wedge between the mujahideen and the population. There was no way to isolate the resistance because it was so fractionalized. The mujahideen ability to provide for or coerce the population enabled control and built up patronage networks. In addition, sanctuary within Pakistan provided access to new recruits within the refugee population; and shelter as well as time when escaping from the Soviets.

For the first eight years of the war and increasing today the priority Afghan missions for the United States and its NATO allies were the so-called “kill/capture mission.” Like the Soviets before them, the United States and NATO conducted battalion-sized sweep operations supported by air cover and indirect fires. Many of these operations included missions and activities that involved culturally obtuse behavior, unnecessarily invasive and violent tactics, and a series of tragic incidents of “collateral damage.”

Cross-Border Sanctuaries and Wider War

Even before the Soviet intervention in 1979, anti-Afghan government fighters had operated from Pakistani territory. The 1893 Durand Line divided Pashtun territory between Afghanistan and British India, and military operations were mounted from both sides of that boundary and from within the tribal areas of north-west India into the settled districts. Following Pakistan’s independence in 1947, the Durand Line became the de facto international border, although Afghanistan never accepted it as such. The tribes on Pakistan’s side of the Durand Line signed instruments of accession to the government of Pakistan, which continued the British policy that granted the Pashtun

tribes a semi-autonomous status in their own tribal areas, with political agents representing the federal government present but possessing limited powers. Pakistan's 1973 Constitution settled the contours of this governing arrangement for modern Pakistan, with seven Tribal Agencies and six Frontier Regions along the Durand Line comprising the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA).

Brutal Soviet tactics were designed to drive the Afghans out of the countryside, especially in the restive Pashtun belt along the Pakistani border. By 1981 Pakistan was host to the world's largest single refugee population, with the vast majority of nearly four million refugees living in some 344 camps and villages within 50 miles of the Afghan border.²⁰ Peshawar, capital of the North-West Frontier Province (NWFP, known today as Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa Province, or KPP), became headquarters to the seven Pakistan-sponsored parties of the Afghan resistance; it was through these parties that most aid and weapons flowed to the fighting mujahideen in Afghanistan. As the mujahideen grew more capable militarily through the first half of the 1980s, Soviet and Afghan government efforts to destabilize Pakistani support developed. These efforts included: air and artillery strikes, bombings (using car bombs and other devices), assassinations, sabotage, and manipulation of tribes that were politically opposed to the mujahideen. As Goodson notes, "These incidents tripled in 1986 and remained at this higher level of intensity until the Soviet withdrawal in 1989."²¹

Tactics of the American-led coalition of Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) in 2001–2002 were not designed to target civilians or drive people off the land and thus there was no widespread population dislocation of Afghans to Pakistan (plus Pakistan closed its border in November 2001, preventing 300,000 potential refugees from crossing). On the contrary, the early 2000s saw significant refugee repatriation from both Pakistan and Iran, as many Afghans returned home in the wake of the fall of the Taliban. The Battle of Tora Bora in December 2001 and Operation Anaconda in March 2002 did drive Taliban, al Qaeda, and associated militant fighters across the border into Pakistan, where these fighters sought refuge. Remnants of the Taliban's Kandahar leadership settled in and around Quetta, capital of Pakistan's Balochistan Province, and a little over 100 miles away from Kandahar across the Afghan border. Jalaluddin Haqqani's network of eastern Pashtun fighters, known as the Haqqani Network (HQN), along with some Central Asian Islamists, went to ground in the Waziristan tribal agencies of the FATA. Gulbuddin Hekmatyar's faction of Hizb-i-Islami (known as HiG), along with senior leaders of al Qaeda, ended up in Bajaur Agency, across the border from Afghanistan's inaccessible eastern provinces.

²⁰ Larry P. Goodson, *Afghanistan's Endless War* (Seattle: U. of Washington Press, 2001), pp. 148–149.

²¹ Ibid, p. 68.

Under pressure from the United States, Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf joined the U.S.-led Global War on Terrorism (GWOT). Musharraf was put into a very awkward position as his anti-militant position brought the lifting of Western sanctions (in place since 1998 nuclear tests) and a resumption of aid, but condemnation from Osama bin Laden and other militant leaders. In October 2002, national and provincial elections in Pakistan saw a six-party coalition of Islamist political parties emerge as a major political player, with the third-most seats in the National Assembly and partial control of the provincial government in both NWFP and Balochistan. Initially, the Afghan, Pakistani, and foreign militants were all relatively quiescent, but December 2003 assassination attempts against Musharraf prompted the Pakistani army to attack al Qaeda fighters and Pakistani Taliban in the FATA during the spring of 2004. Also in 2004 U.S. military and paramilitary GWOT forces (not OEF forces) began the first cross-border attacks on Islamist militants in the FATA using unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) such as the Predator and Reaper drones. Only nine such cross-border attacks occurred during 2004–2007, but in mid-2008 the pace increased, with some 33 attacks during the year. Under the Barack Obama Administration attacks increased further, with 53 in 2009 and 110 in 2010. Drone strikes continued at a high pace in 2011, with 40 strikes in the first half of the year, plus the May 2, 2011 commando raid that killed Osama bin Laden in Abbottabad.

War Weariness on the Home Front

Soviet war weariness and the war's unpopularity appeared to develop slowly and were somewhat surprising given the history of Soviet repression of popular discontent. However, the Afghanistan War represented the first major deployment of Soviet military forces since World War II, as ultimately some 620,000 Soviet forces deployed to Afghanistan during the war (with 115,000 troops the highest number of forces deployed at one time). Soviet casualties included nearly 15,000 killed, almost 54,000 wounded, and over 400,000 sick.²² Mikhail Gorbachev became General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in 1985 and thereafter instituted widespread reforms, including *perestroika* (restructuring of the economy) and *glasnost* (openness).

Most of the Soviet forces in Afghanistan were from the 40th Army, based in the Turkestan Military District in Soviet Central Asia, and while many of the soldiers had a common ethnic heritage with some of the Afghan peoples, those soldiers also came from lands that the Soviet Union conquered in the 1920s and 1930s. For the first half of the war, the Soviet authorities attempted to downplay the war's existence, not even admitting to casualties for

²²G. F. Krivosheev, *Combat Losses and Casualties in the Twentieth Century* (London: Greenhill Books, 1993).

the first two years and then portraying the troops as heroes engaged in their Socialist duty. To that end, operations were presented as part of defending the homeland and casualties continued to be underreported. Nonetheless, public opinion polls of Soviet citizens in 1985 demonstrated a sharp shift toward negative views of the war.²³ As the Afghan War dragged on and more soldiers returned dead, wounded, sick, addicted to drugs, and/or disheartened to a society that was undergoing significant internal change, discontent became more public. The Geneva Accords of April 1988, signed by Afghanistan and Pakistan and guaranteed by the Soviet Union and United States, set forth the timetable that culminated in the withdrawal of Soviet combat forces from Afghanistan in February 1989. Thereafter, the Soviet Union propped up the Afghan Communist regime by providing money and aid (including airstrikes mounted from Soviet territory) until the dissolution of the Soviet Union on December 25, 1991, twelve years to the day after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979.

American and Western war weariness also took time to develop, as the shock of the September 11, 2001 attacks on the United States prompted an initial surge of American patriotic fervor that provided strong support for a military intervention in Afghanistan. By September 12, 2001 NATO had invoked Article Five of its Charter, declaring that the attack on the United States was an attack on all NATO members. Nonetheless, while initial public opinion in the United States favored a military response, public opinion was decisively opposed in all of the other NATO countries surveyed in September 2001, plus most other countries.²⁴ However, the early stages of the war were easy, few Western troops were deployed in Afghanistan, and there were few Western casualties, and by 2003 much public opinion had shifted focus to the American military operation in Iraq.

The Iraq War brought differences between the United States and other NATO and coalition governments into sharp relief, which paradoxically allowed some countries, such as Canada, to see the Afghanistan War as a place where it could stand with the United States while disagreeing with U.S. policy on Iraq. Thus, NATO took command of ISAF in August 2003, with Germany and Canada contributing approximately 80% of the 5000 troops. UN Security Council Resolution 1510, passed in October 2003, authorized ISAF to extend its influence beyond Kabul, which occurred in stages during 2003–2006. The nature of the expansion was that certain countries took primary or secondary responsibility for certain locations or missions, and in particular as ISAF pushed into the Taliban strongholds of the south and southwestern parts

²³ Anthony Arnold, "The Soviet Threat to Pakistan," In *The Red Army on Pakistan's Border: Policy Implications for the United States*, Eds. Theodore L. Eliot, Jr. and Robert L. Pfaltzgraff, Jr. (McLean, VA: Pergamon Press, 1986), pp. 10–11.

²⁴ Gallup International, *Gallup International Poll on terrorism in the US*, September 2001. <http://www.gallup-international.com/surveys.htm> (accessed August 4, 2011).

of the country and casualties mounted, public opinion in the home countries turned sharply and inexorably negative. As of June 2011, ISAF fielded 132,000 troops from 47 countries, including all 28 NATO members, some Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council countries, and some other countries.

By 2007, cross-national and domestic public opinion surveys showed widespread public opposition in virtually all NATO and allied countries, and the war's unpopularity has worsened since then. For example, the 2009 Pew Global Attitudes survey had only five of 25 countries with majorities that favored continuing to have U.S. and NATO forces in Afghanistan—Israel, (59 percent), United States (57 percent), Kenya (56 percent), Nigeria (52 percent), and France (50 percent).²⁵ Now held by many to be the longest American War, public opinion in all major contributing countries (including the United States) is decisively against continuing in Afghanistan. Virtually every poll conducted in 2011 in troop-contributing countries demonstrates opposition to continuing a war that has grown in size and cost over time. Polls taken in the United States after the Bin Laden killing show a public that increasingly opposes the Afghan War, with 56 percent of the public favoring the withdrawal of troops as soon as possible in June 2011.²⁶

Differences

While the similarities between the Soviet and U.S. experiences in Afghanistan are remarkable, there are important differences. First, the U.S.-led war of today differs substantially from the Soviet-led war of the 1980s in that the impact of the first war was so traumatizing for the Afghan state and society and the regional neighborhood. When Americans first deployed to Afghanistan in October 2001 they landed in a country that had been reduced to rubble by seemingly endless, high-intensity war. The first war left no village in Afghanistan untouched, as fully 50 percent of the pre-war population was killed, wounded, and/or driven out of their homes. The social structure, economy, government, religion, culture, ethnic balance—everything was altered, much of it profoundly.

Today's war exposes many of the scars that are still fresh from the Soviet invasion of the 1980s. The deeper currents of Afghan society, e.g. aspects of the tribal construction of Pashtun society, the rural basis of the economy, and the traditional attitudes toward modern innovations, have proven remarkably resilient. Yet, major changes have occurred that appear to be more than superficial. Collapse of traditional agriculture led to the rise of opium production, heroin manufacturing, and the criminal networks that

²⁵ Pew Global Attitudes Project, *25-Nation Pew Global Attitudes Survey* (Washington, DC: Pew Research Center, July 23, 2009).

²⁶ *Record Number Favors Removing U.S. Troops from Afghanistan* (Washington, DC: Pew Research Center, June 23, 2011).

smuggle the product for Western consumption and corrupt the Afghan government so that the heroin trade can continue. Islamism has taken a harsh turn in Afghanistan, such that at least some important opponents of the current government see themselves as engaged in an unrelenting *Jihad* against the Western forces in which once-unthinkable tactics such as suicide bombing and the use of improvised explosive devices (IEDs) have come to be viewed as justified. And the millions of Afghans who fled or were born abroad now constitute a Diaspora population whose tentacles reach into present-day Afghanistan to subject its society there to an expanded culture war of a traditionalism mutated by virulent Islamism and a war-scarred landscape vs. a modernism mutated by the influences of pervasive globalization.

A second important difference is that the motivation for the Soviet intervention was substantially different than the motivation for the American intervention. Perhaps the Soviet leadership did not wish to intervene in Afghanistan, but under the Brezhnev Doctrine of 1968 it had to assist a Communist government. And, expansion to the south predated the Soviet Union, having been a project of the Tsars (Kremlin) for over two centuries. The Soviet Union intended to conquer Afghanistan, albeit to rule it indirectly through the PDPA. The United States only intervened in Afghanistan after the al Qaeda attacks of 9/11. U.S. intervention came after years of neglect and sanctions (put in place in 1999 following al Qaeda attacks on U.S. embassies in East Africa). No explicit national project of imperial expansion existed, and President George W. Bush proved to be a reluctant nation-builder in Afghanistan.

Perhaps as a consequence of the second difference, a third important difference exists: Soviet tactics, especially in the early 1980s, were considerably more brutal and indiscriminate than American tactics. In an effort to keep the costs of occupation reasonable the Soviets bombed and strafed Afghan villages with virtual impunity until the CIA supplied the Afghan mujahideen with Stinger missiles in mid-1980s. The purpose was to turn Afghan villages into rubble, seed the fields and trails with “butterfly” anti-personnel mines, and force the people off the land. American tactics have been considerably more restrained and are shaped by an acceptance of the international laws governing conduct in warfare. This is not to suggest that the United States has not had instances of military overreaction involving culturally obtrusive behavior or actions involving “collateral damage,” for both have unfortunately occurred. Yet, while all wars and military interventions have their mistakes and excesses, American tactics have generally been shaped by restraint, whereas Soviet tactics were much less refined and restrained.

Finally, a fourth extremely important difference is that the Soviet invasion and occupation of Afghanistan was unprovoked, whereas the events of 9/11 prompted the United States to attack Afghanistan, topple the Taliban regime, and broker the Bonn Process of December 2001 that led to the installation of the Karzai government. Because of the heinous nature of the

9/11 attacks NATO invoked Article 5 of its Charter, paving the way for its first out-of-area operation and internationalizing today's operations in Afghanistan, which now are conducted by a United Nations-mandated International Security Assistance Force led by NATO.

Conclusion

In its present form, current U.S. Afghan strategy holds little promise for success, especially if our assessment of the parallels with the past is accurate. As with all strategies, U.S. leaders must consider carefully the intensity and depth of American interests—that is, consideration of the *ends* must precede the *ways* and *means*.

Since 9/11, both President George W. Bush and President Barack Obama have characterized defeating al Qaeda in Afghanistan as a vital national interest of the United States and have deployed increasing numbers of U.S. forces and spent more and more money to achieve that goal. Prior to 9/11, however, American relations with Afghanistan were lukewarm at best. The United States did not step in after the post-World War II British disengagement from the Indian subcontinent to counter Soviet influence in Afghanistan. Instead, the United States aligned itself with Pakistan and Iran. In the 1980s, the United States did seize the opportunity presented by the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 to use the Afghan mujahideen as a proxy force to bleed and ultimately defeat the Soviets there. However, the United States did not deploy its own forces and was quick to disengage from the region once the Soviets withdrew. Thus, until recently the United States did not appear to have vital interests in Afghanistan. Most of the al Qaeda organization that once existed in Afghanistan has been destroyed or relocated elsewhere and its leader Osama Bin Laden was killed on May 2, 2011, meaning that the stated interest for the U.S. presence in Afghanistan is no longer relevant. Different reasons might now exist for the United States to view Afghanistan as a vital interest, especially the involvement of other major actors there in pursuit of often divergent interests.

Ultimately, no strategy might be as important as the Afghan societal and cultural factors that undercut it. Any Afghan strategy has five critical and interrelated pillars – security, governance, development, justice, and regional. Success overall requires success on all, and from the beginning of U.S. intervention in Afghanistan the strategy has been deficient in several areas.

First, security is not the key for Afghanistan, although insecurity undermines efforts on the other pillars. *Rather, we see the center of gravity as government legitimacy.* Historical analyses have suggested that success in a counterinsurgency (COIN) is largely proportional to the extent to which the regime is viewed as legitimate by the population. If the government is legitimate then the insurgency will likely not succeed, but counterinsurgency

will fail on behalf of a government that its own people hold to be illegitimate. Indeed, the Counterinsurgency Field Manual of the U.S. Army and Marine Corps says, "Victory is achieved when the populace consents to the government's legitimacy..."²⁷ A government that is seen as legitimate by 85 to 90 percent of the population is the *sine qua non* of successful counterinsurgency.²⁸ It is extremely problematic that the vast majority of people in Afghanistan (and especially in regions outside of Kabul) today do not view as legitimate the national authority from Kabul, due in part to the allegations of rampant corruption associated with central government authorities.²⁹ In numerous areas, especially in the rural Southern Pashtun hinterlands, the Taliban are not only doing a better job of governance and providing justice than Kabul, they are also seen as more legitimate than the distant and unpopular leadership in Kabul.

The legitimacy of Afghan governance has traditionally been derived from two sources: dynastic, usually in the form of monarchies and tribal patriarchies, or religious, and sometimes both.³⁰ This problem of legitimacy is especially acute at the local and village level of rural Pashtun society, for whom dynastic and religious authority has been paramount for millennia.³¹ Just as the present Kabul government is having an extremely difficult time establishing legitimacy, so too did the Afghan government during the Soviet occupation struggle. The PDPA was never popular with the vast majority of the Afghan people and obviously could not derive any legitimacy from the sources suggested above.

Security cannot come from a strong foreign force on behalf of rulers that people view as corrupt, inefficient, and ineffective. Nor can it come from a domestic army led by those elites. Historically, the Afghan state could be predatory and extractive, as long as it was not intrusive or engaged in social engineering in the countryside. Even if the government has dynastic or religious sources of legitimacy, historically it still had to enter into a bargain with local elites in the countryside and provincial centers. Such bargains were lubricated with patronage, so that local elites could have power and dispense goods and services to their people, while simultaneously keeping the unpredictable Kabul government at bay. The system of government that was

²⁷ Field Manual 3-24 (FM 3-24), *Counterinsurgency* (Washington, DC: Department of the Army, December 2006), ch. 1, p. 3.

²⁸ Johnson and Mason, "Refighting the Last War," pp. 2–14; Kalev I. Sepp, "Best Practices in Counterinsurgency," *Military Review*, May–June, 2005, pp. 8–12.

²⁹ Ronald L. Holt, "Afghan Village Militia: A People Centric Strategy to Win," *Small Wars Journal.com*, 2009.

³⁰ For an excellent review of political legitimacy in Afghanistan, see Thomas Barfield, "Problems of Establishing Legitimacy in Afghanistan," *Iranian Studies*, Vol. 37, 2004, pp. 263–69; and Thomas Barfield, *Afghanistan: A Cultural and Political History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010).

³¹ Louis Dupree, *Afghanistan*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980).

imposed on Afghanistan after 9/11 by the West and those Afghan elites who benefitted from it was highly centralized, although the initial economy of force counterterrorism military strategy meant that local warlords were allowed to persist as augmentation to the inadequate outside and national forces engaged in security provision. Also, while money has poured into the country for a multitude of reasons, there has been little success in connecting the economic largesse to the development of governmental legitimacy. In fact, just the opposite has occurred, whereby the new Afghan political elites at the central levels have enriched themselves so obscenely that the post-9/11 windfall has diminished rather than enhanced governmental legitimacy.

Likewise, there has been almost no meaningful effort to pursue justice, a concept at the core of Islamic notions of good governance, and especially critical in post-conflict societies. When so much blood has been spilled by so many people within a society for such a long period of time, some mechanism for transitional justice is needed to break the cycle of bloodshed, such as the famous “Truth and Reconciliation” approach of post-apartheid South Africa. The 2002 Emergency *Loya Jirga* (Grand Council) that cemented Karzai’s position as President illustrates this perfectly, and sadly, for Afghanistan. One author served as an International Monitor and Technical Advisor for Elections for that process. Weeks of hard and often dangerous work in the provinces by Afghans and international monitors alike occurred to sideline warlords, war criminals, drug dealers, and many other dangerous characters from playing a role in the leadership of the country. Yet, when the big meeting finally occurred in Kabul, all the dubious characters showed up and got credentials from the *Loya Jirga* Commission to participate anyway. Once they were inside the big tent they could throw their weight around and ensure a result they wanted. Justice was sacrificed on the altar of expediency, and has been repeatedly thereafter.

Finally, there is an important regional pillar to any successful strategy for Afghanistan. Four of the world’s most important powers (United States, China, India, and Russia) are engaged in Afghanistan, as are Pakistan and Iran, as well as NATO. Regardless of what diplomats and politicians say, they do not all have similar interests, nor is it as simple as one set of powers against another set, as the alliances are shifting and multidimensional. Yet, Afghanistan’s ethnic groups straddle its borders with neighboring countries, meaning everyone has a proxy militia in Afghanistan if need be. Also, Afghanistan may possess substantial mineral wealth, meaning that it might be a prize for larger powers wanting what it has. And, Afghanistan has long been the “crossroads of Asia,” meaning that it is even a bigger prize because it holds the key to anywhere else in the region. For all of these reasons no strategy can be successful that does not take into account the way regional actors may act.

These are the realities of Afghanistan that shape the environment in which a strategy must be constructed and implemented. There is one additional factor of great consequence, which is that public opinion in the

West no longer supports a long, expensive, and frustratingly uncertain war in Afghanistan. For NATO to continue to act out of area and the United States to stay long enough for all of the strategic initiatives to ripen will require a level of success that does not seem likely to occur.

Thus, there are probably three potential strategies left to us. They are:

- **Better Nation-Building through COIN** – This approach is predicated on a belief that only through nation-building can the root causes of Afghanistan's problems be resolved. It essentially accepts that a heavy American presence is required to bring about enough good governance and development for success. However, U.S. and allied countries have found their support for a continued, expensive engagement declining, and the manifest corruption and ineffectiveness of the Afghan government does not instill confidence that this approach is working. Moreover, President Obama has already announced a July 2011 timetable for the beginning of an American withdrawal of combat forces.
- **Counterterrorism is Enough** – A counterterrorism approach does not accept the necessity of nation-building—or at least holds that such a commitment of means is not justified by the ends. Instead, adherents of this approach, increasingly in the ascendance in Washington, believe that the United States and its allies can achieve minimal national security goals through the relatively secretive activities of counterterrorism specialists. While such an approach may not resolve underlying problems and, indeed, might only be a variation of the containment strategy that was employed against the Taliban in the 1990s, this is much more sustainable than the big COIN nation-building approach.
- **Declare Victory and Disengage** – It may be that the only strategy worth considering is one that abandons Afghanistan to its own fate. After all, the United States has already spent \$444 billion on Afghanistan,³² a country whose rapid GDP growth rates of the post-9/11 era have allowed it to get its national budget up to \$4 billion per year (almost entirely based on foreign aid). Also, the United States has achieved all of its initial objectives in Afghanistan, at least to some extent. In particular, the Bin Laden killing of May 2011 corresponds to the defeat of al Qaeda in the eyes of many Americans, which is the core goal of U.S. policy. If U.S. interests have changed and the ends now justify a greater deployment of forces and more expenditure of money, then such a case must be made with clarity and conviction.

³² Amy Belasco, *The Cost of Iraq, Afghanistan, and Other Global War on Terrorism Operations Since 9/11* (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, March 29, 2011), p. 1.

We are reluctant to suggest complete abandonment, partly because other key countries are now engaged in Afghanistan in ways that threaten U.S. interests and partly because the earlier era of U.S. disengagement saw the advent of the Taliban, al Qaeda, and eventually 9/11. Moreover, there is an argument to be made that Afghanistan presents the United States with a remarkable opportunity for international leadership that, despite some difficulties along the way, is still not lost to us. However, we are not convinced that the United States should pursue the expensive and obvious strategy followed by the Soviets when it failed so miserably for them. That leaves us unenthusiastically in favor of using counterterrorism to achieve America's most pressing security interests in Afghanistan, with regional diplomatic and development efforts as critical enablers.

Afghanistan needs a good government that has legitimacy with its population, dispenses justice, spreads economic benefits, and lives peacefully with its neighbors as a hub of Asian trade. Perhaps it needs a constitutional monarchy with an appropriate role for the Ulema, as in other Islamic countries, and a reconstituted, empowered system of local governance. The projected mineral wealth and geostrategic location might very well provide the foundation for an economic miracle, and with proper investment in infrastructure and human capital Afghanistan could be built into a functioning twenty-first-century country. But none of this will happen quickly and history suggests that economies built on extractive industries face their own unique problems. Moreover, these otherwise admirable goals cannot be provided by the United States or other outside powers, and the Soviet experience shows that staying too long in Afghanistan carries its own costs. Above all else, the Soviet experience shows us the painful mistakes of the past, and we ignore those mistakes at our peril. Otherwise, as George Santayana once warned us, "Those who do not learn from history are doomed to repeat it."

